



How to Market IT's Value

By Dan Roberts
2009-06-08

Marketing is about communicating the value of IT, which is more essential than ever in a down economy.

In my work with CIOs and their teams, I'm hearing a lot of discussion about marketing IT. The problem is, there are far too many misperceptions and misunderstandings surrounding the issue.

Ask 20 CIOs to define marketing, and you'll get at least that many answers. There's also a big turn-off factor: people in IT seem naturally repelled by anything that smells of hype or sales. Even those accustomed to hearing "IT" and "marketing" in the same sentence may see it as an extra, a nice-to-have, if you have the time.

But the truth is, marketing is particularly critical during these troubling economic times. It's important, however, to dispel some of the myths around it and focus on the many benefits CIOs can achieve from marketing their IT organization's capabilities.

Here are some typical exchanges I have with IT pros about marketing.

So what is marketing, anyway?

First, let's talk about what marketing isn't. Marketing is not about selling or hype or glitz. It's not bragging or gloating or tooting your own horn. Marketing, in this context, is simply "creating an awareness of IT's value." In fact, if you or your staff can't deal with the term "marketing," try words like "educating" or "communicating."

Why does marketing matter?

Today, perception matters. Simply delivering great work is no longer enough to ensure that IT is positioned strategically as the provider of first choice versus whatever third-party services are out there in the marketplace.

Why should I care about marketing in this economic climate?

The short answer: It's the economy. How many vendors, consultants, outsourcers and even shadow IT groups are right now pitching their services within your company? As you know, these people are adept at making promises and outlining compelling business cases regarding their ability to reduce the IT spend in your company. Believe me, the C-levels are more than open to that kind of messaging in this challenging economy. It's only getting worse as a larger number of ever-hungry competitors scramble for a smaller share of the shrinking pie.

Who is responsible for marketing IT?

Most people think marketing is the job of the CIOs or their direct reports. Others think it's the job of an IT relationship manager or communications pro. These are all correct answers, but they're not the total answer. Marketing is everyone's job. That may come as a surprise, but it's the job of every single person on the IT staff. If you have 500 people in your IT organization, then you should have 500 people marketing IT's value. They're all playing a role in creating IT's image, its brand.

The question is, what are they marketing? Are they marketing IT positively? Are they marketing your organization consistently? Are they conveying the messages that give clients and business partners a clear perception of IT's value? Most CIOs would answer, "I don't know" and "no, no and no" to these important questions, and they quickly realize why marketing (or communicating or educating) IT is everyone's job today.

We're IT folks—can we be taught to market IT?

It doesn't take an MBA to learn marketing. Once trained to understand marketing, anyone in IT can positively impact the image and credibility of their department or project. Training includes understanding what marketing is and isn't, how to leverage tactical—what we call "hallway"—marketing and proven techniques, and how to develop and execute IT-specific marketing plans.

Thousands of IT leaders and staff have participated in our IT marketing workshops over the past 20 years, and we are consistently blown away by how creatively and successfully they're applying what they've learned to their business environment. And once they understand the what's-in-it-for-me (what we call "WIIFMs") of marketing and

How to Market IT's Value

unlock their creative juices, they will start to see how they can incorporate these concepts into their daily work life to benefit their team, their project, their organization and their company.

Why does it seem like marketing IT is tricky business?

Let's face it: nobody wants to feel like they're being marketed to. Any new skill is awkward at first! And, in most organizations, if you're too blatant with your marketing efforts, clients question why you're spending money and time on marketing activities.

Second, when you're marketing IT, you're marketing an intangible, and that's a lot more challenging than marketing a product that someone can see, touch, feel, smell or taste. Now, you might argue that IT offers products in the form of technology, but that's not the process-improving, business-impacting value that IT should be marketing.

As a CIO or IT leader, where do I start?

To help IT leadership teams market their organizations, we developed a 13-step methodology. It's a logical, step-by-step approach that's very appealing to IT folks, who prefer the tangible to the nebulous. The philosophy behind the methodology is to teach IT organizations how to fish, so they can draw on the methodology for each time they need to market a new initiative or the organization itself.

Most IT leaders we work with today are developing marketing plans that target IT as well as the business. In other words, they're marketing IT's value to IT. Why would they do that? It helps ensure that everyone in the organization understands the full value and impact of IT, not just what their team or unit does. So many CIOs—especially those who head up large and geographically dispersed organizations—struggle with presenting one face of IT to the client. Too often, the organization is seen as a disjointed, non-cohesive group, where one hand doesn't know what the other is doing. This includes any contractors or non-badged people representing IT in the organization. So by making everyone in IT aware of what the other areas are doing, they can market IT positively and consistently.

We also coach IT leaders to be targeted with their objectives and desired audiences. Many IT marketing efforts are so broadly focused and watered down that they don't have the desired effect. There's no such thing as a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. You need to tailor the approach and message to fit the audience.

I'm starting to really get it now—but what about my peers? Are other IT executives embracing marketing?

When we started teaching IT leaders about marketing 20 years ago, fewer than 1 percent understood its value. Looking back 10 years ago, a greater percentage of IT leaders were just starting to engage in marketing, but these activities were mostly tactical. (At the time, average CIO tenure was less than three years—coincidence?)

How to Market IT's Value

Today, CIOs understand why marketing is critical to success, but they're looking for the specific how-to's. They're more business savvy than ever and are building a consultative, marketing savvy IT workforce and culture and using marketing to strategically position IT as their company's competitive IT provider of first choice. As for CIO tenure—according to recent research, it's up to somewhere in the five-year range.

How do I know we're ready to market our IT organization?

Most IT organizations aren't well-positioned for marketing. If your organization operates as a siloed, technology-centric order taker, and you try to market IT as the consultative, client-focused, business partner of choice, there's going to be an obvious disconnect that will undermine your marketing efforts and further erode the trust and confidence of the business community. If I had a buck for every IT leader that I have convinced to take a step back to instill a consultative mindset and a client-oriented culture before tackling marketing, I could have retired by now (current economy and 401K performance aside). The bottom line is, you have to be ready to deliver on your marketing promise.

What are the benefits of marketing IT?

The benefits are many. They include:

- Linking IT to the overall strategic initiatives of the company.

- Enhancing IT's professional image and boosting its credibility as a trusted partner.

- Bridging the gap when IT is remote or not co-located with the business.

- Increasing the awareness of everyone in IT of the full extent of IT's services and capabilities so that they can Managing demand and overload, and reducing unwanted, low-value work.

- Providing IT leaders with the competence, confidence, commitment and consistency needed to compete against the plethora of external service providers who are pitching their services and cost-cutting abilities to your corporate executives today.

Although we may not have the image or reputation we would like today, we need to recognize that our IT organization does a tremendous amount of great work. Our IT staffs are some of the most dedicated, hard-working people you'll find in most organizations. They are "on" 24x7, working nights and weekends to meet deadlines and go-live dates.

Dan Roberts is the president of Ouellette & Associates and co-author of Leading IT Transformation: The Roadmap for Success.